

JOIN THE VOICES FOR RECOVERY

Stories of Hope and Healing

Each year during **National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month (Recovery Month)**, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, highlights the many voices of those who have experienced their own substance use disorder story, allowing them to share their personal journeys of addiction, treatment, and recovery.

Celebrating the power of community support and understanding, this year's **Recovery Month** theme is **"Join the Voices for Recovery: Together We Learn, Together We Heal."** It emphasizes the need to use all available resources, in our communities and on the Internet, to educate people and their families about the disease and to help those with substance use disorders, and those close to them, get support. The following stories illustrate unique personal experiences and the ways addiction, treatment, and recovery can affect everyone. Learn from these voices and share these stories to raise awareness of substance use disorders. Most importantly, spread the word that recovery is possible.

Tonya Wheeler

Denver, CO

President of Advocates for Recovery, Colorado



I have not used drugs or alcohol in more than 18 years. As a result of my long-term recovery, I have an amazing relationship with my family and community, and I get the honor of sharing my story with others to show the reality of recovery.

I began using drugs and alcohol at age 12, and by 18 my addiction had progressed to daily use. The consequences of my addiction, which included legal problems, being estranged from my family, and loss of custody of my daughter, began shortly after I started using drugs. The internal consequences of my addiction were worse than the

external, including my loss of self-esteem, the inability to feel emotions, lack of personal integrity, and the loss of who I was prior to my addiction.

To my surprise, when I was ready for help, I was turned away from treatment due to lack of insurance coverage. I reached out to my parents who, thankfully, were able to help me enter treatment. There, I began to attend 12-step meetings and learned about the necessity of support from others who had lived in addiction too and have recovery today.

Recovery has not always been easy, but it was always worth it! For the last 18 years, I have continued to attend meetings and have the support of others who are in recovery. I am so grateful for the work I get to do in my community – I get to share the message of miracles that happen in recovery. Today, my life is amazing and I know recovery is a possibility for all!

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Erin Bludworth

Denver, CO
Counselor



I am a 35-year-old survivor who has been clean and sober for almost 7 years. My drug of choice was methamphetamine, and I would stop at nothing to get my next hit. I was ill, both mentally and physically, from not eating or caring for myself. In a matter of four years, I lost everything, including my son and my freedom. In 2001, I was arrested and charged with many crimes, all due to my addiction.

In 2002, I was given the gift of being able to enter a long-term treatment facility. I was determined to save my life. I had to learn how to be productive and goal-oriented, how to have a positive self-esteem, and how to fight for my life. They taught me how to be proud of my accomplishments and of who I am. In 2004, I graduated from the program.

Sobriety has brought so much back to me, including my son. I have found a new love for life and others. I now work as a counselor, helping people to overcome and cope with their disease. I enjoy helping others to help themselves. I assist in guiding those who are in the same position I was more than seven years ago.

Sobriety and life are worth fighting for. We just have to be shown the way.

Aaron Kucharski

Providence, RI
National Field Organizer, Recovery Voices Count Project



I'm a person in long-term recovery, meaning that I haven't had a drink or a drug since September 6, 2003. Recovery has given me a new life, a new direction, and has helped me to find the passions in my life that were absent before I came into recovery.

Maintaining my recovery has been a constant focus, as I find new tools and resources to help me keep the life I now enjoy. I've been able to stay involved with activities I care about, such as writing music and participating in the political process. I was recently introduced to the growing recovery advocacy movement and had the honor of working with *Faces and Voices of Recovery* for the *Recovery Voices Count* project, which works with organizations and advocates from all levels to increase awareness of the recovery community as a political constituency.

I truly believe that the resources that were made available to me should be available to anyone. Recovery housing, mutual support groups, advocacy opportunities, and drug therapy are all a part of my recovery story. I'll continue to fight to get help for those who need it most!

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I have been fortunate to travel and expand my view of what recovery is all about. I know that millions of people in recovery are serving as productive members of society – they are those who have fought the barriers themselves, and are real human beings rather than just a statistic.

I encourage everyone in recovery to tell their recovery and success stories to anyone who will listen. The more we put a face and a voice on an issue, the more real it becomes to others.

Elizabeth Currier

Cooperstown, NY

Director of the Council on Addictions of New York State, Inc.



The day my world began to crumble, January 6, 1976, I had my last drink. Until then, I had no idea that my drinking was a problem. After all, I was a social drinker – or so I thought. On that night, my 15-year-old daughter overdosed on a combination of phenobarbital and brandy and almost died. I met with a counselor at the hospital to talk about my daughter, but the first words he said were, “Your daughter says you drink too much. Do you?” Thus began a series of “higher powered” events – there are no coincidences – that started me on an incredible journey. That first year was a rollercoaster ride of hating myself, having my eyes opened and then questioning again whether I really had a problem, but all the time, being loved unconditionally until finally I began to get it.

This journey has given me a life beyond my wildest dreams. I’ve come from a place of loneliness, shame, and fear to one of love, joy, and purpose. I have the skills to be of service in addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery. The greatest blessing has been my family. My four children, raised in the chaos of addiction and manifesting addiction in their own ways, have found their own pathways to recovery. The addiction cycle, I truly believe, has been broken for this family.

Now, I have the privilege of devoting all my time to living, promoting, and supporting recovery. I am active in the recovery movement at the federal, state and local level, serving on the boards of *Faces and Voices of Recovery*, *Friends of Recovery New York*, and my local recovery community organization. I am proud to say, “I am a woman in long-term recovery from alcoholism.”

R.F. Maldonado

New York, NY

Author and Songwriter



I am a married Latino author and songwriter, a former teenage street-gang leader, and a former 25-year heroin/cocaine addict from New York City. Even after living a clean, sober lifestyle for the past 22 years, I am actually amazed to be here today. Nearly 99 percent of everyone I got high with growing up in New York’s Spanish Harlem passed away long ago. I shared my first bottle of cheap liquor with my neighborhood friends when I was 14, and that same summer, I smoked marijuana. I immediately knew that I liked both, and that would eventually lead me to sniffing heroin at 16 and then straight into my horrible 25-year heroin/cocaine addiction.

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After going to jail once or twice a year, I tried going to rehab centers, but my biggest obstacle was actually believing that I could ever change my life and world. I'd start getting high within a day or two of leaving a program. My whole world changed when I entered a 30-day, 12-step rehab program on October 14, 1986, in New York. Since then, I've been completely committed to my personal recovery. One of the many wonders has been being a pillar of strength for my family when death claimed both my sister and mom. I never even considered using those painful times as an excuse to derail my recovery and get high.

I'm very grateful to be alive and sincerely hope that the "can-do" message of my own recovery in my book, *Dancing on Broken Glass*, touches at least one life, changing it for the better. As an addict in recovery, I continue to wish to spread my genuine message of hope and recovery!

Kevin Young Trenton, ME Recovery Advocate



I am in long-term recovery, meaning that I haven't used opiates, alcohol, and other drugs for more than 20 years. I am very committed to recovery, as it has given my family back the hope and trust in me they used to have. I speak out now because I believe that long-term recovery is possible for all, and I would like to help make that possible.

Like many, I had a tough time before I found recovery. I had isolated myself from my family and anyone who wanted me to be healthy. I knew what it was like to sleep behind the same dumpster I was eating from and to smoke cigarette butts that I would pick up off the ground. I did not think there was any hope. I was numb to the world around me and believed I was living the only life I was capable of.

Six months after moving to Maine to pursue a woman I was in love with, I finally found recovery on Thanksgiving Day 1988, with the help of some very supportive people already in recovery. I started attending support group meetings and learned that I had to change my behaviors to change my attitudes and thinking processes. I discovered that by surrounding myself with others who had long-term recovery, the recovery road was possible for me.

Today, long-term recovery has taught me to hold my head high and deal with life as it comes. I'm respected by my family and others; I'm able to maintain a good job, make and keep friendships, and have relationships with those close to me. Two and a half years into my recovery, I married the woman I loved. We've been in a devoted, fulfilling relationship for more than 17 years.

I had no material possessions when I first found recovery, and today I have a wonderful house and a life that's second to none. Today, anything is possible, and my dream is that this way of life is available for all those who've suffered like I have.

Charlie Yetman

Boston, MA

Recovery Advocate



I am one of the luckiest people in the world! It is truly how I feel. I am in my second decade of recovery from substance abuse. Through my recovery, I have opened numerous programs to help people like me. In one program, men coming out of prison can be assessed and evaluated for further treatment. I am able to provide hope by my example of recovery and peer mentoring. The trust that is given to me by others in recovery is inspirational.

I am someone with a lot to offer. Through recovery, I was given the chance to prove that. Now I get to do what I love, all while making a living and proving to others that recovery is possible. I feel like the luckiest man in the world, and there are many men and women who will feel the same way if given the chance.

Christina Thompson

Belton, SC

Recovery Advocate



I no longer do the things I used to when I was obsessed with using. I have learned to respect myself and others. I genuinely love my family and contribute to society by helping others who are addicted find a new way of life. In fact, after years of mutually discordant communication, my mother now receives weekly calls from me with love and gratitude.

I've long since been identified as suffering from untreated bipolar disorder, but for many years in recovery, I had difficulty with stability. I was a tornado in peoples' lives. I couldn't sleep well, had auditory hallucinations, over-reacted to most emotional stimuli, was unpredictable in behavior and speech – shocking myself at times – irresponsibly spent money, and was occasionally suicidal. Eventually, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, but was discouraged from taking medicine by well-meaning people in recovery who said that taking any medication would be the same as “using.” I had tried medication only twice and quit because of the stigma. It wasn't until I made a series of wrong, life-changing decisions and wound up having a breakdown in a public place that I got the help I needed.

So I have been willing to take medication – as any diabetic or high blood pressure patient would – and, after about 12+ years of trying to find the right medication, have finally found an effective one. I still take medication to remain emotionally and mentally stable. I've been contentedly married for more than 10 years and have two healthy, happy children who know they are loved. I don't consider myself cured; I continue with my meetings and practice recovery to give back to others and to maintain my spiritual growth.

Woody Giessmann

Boston, MA

Founder of Right Turn



As someone living in recovery, I know that music can be an outlet for people's feelings. In 2003, I founded **Right Turn**, an organization that helps artists to enhance their creativity by learning to live free of alcohol and drugs.

My own recovery helped me to become a drug addiction clinician. I believe that a treatment approach that incorporates creative expression and brings people together into a safe haven to preserve their creative gifts can be successful.

I am committed to spreading the value of addiction recovery through this program and want to help others the same way I was helped. **Right Turn** is how and where the healing begins.

Timothy Harrington

Manhattan Beach, CA

Recovery Advocate



I started drinking at 12 and managed to *not* cross the imaginary line of no return until I was about 18. It was a period that included moves around the country, sordid relationships, several DUIs, a thousand lies, some thievery, and umpteen "never again" promises, not to mention a sense of loneliness and despair I never want to repeat.

Intervention came in 1997, as I sat hung-over next to some guy smoking a joint by my pool. Something in me shattered when my brother Chris, whom I hadn't spoken to in quite a while, asked if I would come inside to talk. I wanted nothing to do with anything serious, but not wanting to be rude, I went inside and there they were: the intervention team.

After 28 days at a treatment center and several months of roughly a meeting a week and being with old friends, I moved to Aspen, opened a bar and proceeded to almost kill myself. I decided Aspen was the problem, so I moved to Austin for five long days and then went back to California, where I stayed with my brother and some friends, who both kicked me out. It was standing on a corner somewhere in Manhattan Beach that my journey began and the seed was planted. I called my mother in hopes of getting her to send me to rehab, but my stepfather, who was 12 years clean at the time, answered the phone. I pleaded for a specific program, but he did me the greatest favor and instead, lovingly said, "Go to 90 meetings in 90 days," and that was that.

I went to a meeting and began my continuing journey in recovery. I attended nearly 270 meetings in my first 90 days, and eventually knew I wanted to work in treatment. I began working at a residential treatment center and quickly learned it was a tough gig, but I really liked the one-on-one work. I was lucky to experience training for a sober companion, a position I later entered and a role I love very much. Today, I have a beautiful wife and two beautiful daughters, and I know that they are miracles for a guy like me.

Jared Hamre

Boston, MA

Recovery Advocate

September 13, 2008, marked my third year of recovery. I am grateful for my recovery. That doesn't mean life struggles have not come my way, but recovery has given me the tools to now cope with challenges.

It was residential treatment that started me on this life-learning process. With the help of the staff and residents, I've learned that practicing positive behavior changes has enabled me to become a good, dependable person – I've changed how I act and perceive myself.

About six months into my recovery I decided to start giving back by speaking at my former high school. Helping others, owning my history, and sharing the value of my experience have taken away the unnecessary shame of this disease. My drug addiction would have ruined my life, but in a matter of three years, recovery has brought me positive friendships, a house, a dog, and a loving girlfriend who is not ashamed of my past, but proud and interested in my recovery.

I'm saddened that too many of my friends have passed away from using drugs. I could be one of them and I'm so grateful to be alive and living in recovery. I do not take recovery for granted. Through [Massachusetts Organization for Addiction Recovery \(MOAR\)](#), I'm learning how to be a voice, helping to ensure that residential treatment can expand to help even more people to live in recovery. Learning how to make positive changes in recovery has given me the skills to be an advocate for positive public policy changes. Joined with others in recovery, families, and friends, voices like mine are making a positive difference in the treatment and recovery landscape.

Kevin Hauschulz

Hartford, CT

Lead Telephone Recovery Support Coordinator, CT Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR)



I am a person in long-term recovery, and have not used drugs or alcohol since June 25, 2006. I feel reconnected with my family and friends, and I'm truly living a life beyond my wildest dreams. My journey into addiction began during high school and evolved tremendously during college. I entered treatment in May 2005 and obtained support from various treatment centers and programs in my area – all of which were tremendous experiences that helped me realize that recovery was a reality for me. Unfortunately, I fell into the trap of prescription drug abuse in 2006, which is why my sobriety date is June 25, 2006.

Since then, I have been blessed with all the wonders that come along with sobriety. I began volunteering and was hired as a telephone recovery support coordinator. I now help to run a program for the entire state of Connecticut. The concept of telephone recovery support is simple: call someone once a week to simply check in and see how they are doing. The results are amazing. I feel honored and extremely lucky to be able to work at an organization that celebrates recovery and puts a positive face on recovery. Another blessing is all the wonderful, inspiring people I have met along this journey. I am now a homeowner and living with my girlfriend of three years, the light of my life. I am pursuing a master's degree in social work.

Dr. Tian Dayton

New York, NY

Director of Program Development for the Caron Foundation; Program Consultant to the Freedom Institute; Maintains a Private Practice



What brought me into this field was what brought so many of us in, a personal relationship with addiction. I watched my father's life, vitality, and faith in a happy future slip slowly into a bottle of scotch. "First the man took the drink, then the drink took the man." Living around addiction – and the pain and chaos it engendered – was traumatizing. It left most of my family with post-traumatic stress disorder. Even years after my dad and the alcohol were gone, the pain it had triggered in all of us was still there, making it hard to relate in a trusting, comfortable manner.

Living on an emotional edge, we were always looking over our shoulders and waiting for the other shoe to drop. I found recovery when I realized the pain from my childhood was interfering with my marriage and mothering. It was an emotional and psychological cancer that was spreading through my most cherished relationships and not getting any better on its own. In fact, it seemed hidden and getting worse, leaking out in overreactions, anger, frustration, and an odd cocktail of emotions, misunderstanding, and disconnections. I threw everything into treating it, as if my life depended on it, because it did and so did the lives of my loved ones. Along with lots of education on the subject of addiction as a family illness, I did one-to-one therapy, group therapy, 12-step programs and several treatment weeks. After 33 years of marriage, 2 thriving adult children, and a wonderful career, I can say that it worked. I've written 12 self-help books on addiction and trauma, and my most recent book, *Emotional Sobriety: From Relationship Trauma to Resilience and Balance*, helps people who have been addicted or lived around addiction to understand what happened to them – finding some answers to conflicts they carry from their past and a new, orderly direction for the future.

Web sites or event examples mentioned in this document and on the *Recovery Month* Web site are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.